

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 20, 2013

**ALISO AND WOOD CANYONS WILDERNESS PARK
PARKING IMPROVEMENTS AND TRAIL PLANNING AND DESIGN**

Project No. 13-011-01

Project Manager: Deborah Ruddock

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$204,000 to the City of Laguna Beach for projects that will facilitate public access to the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park, including (1) design and construction of parking improvements, and (2) planning and design of a new trail connection.

LOCATION: City of Laguna Beach, Orange County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31409 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access to the coast:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of two hundred four thousand dollars (\$204,000) to the City of Laguna Beach (“City”) for projects in the City that will facilitate public access to the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park, including (1) design and construction of parking improvements, and (2) planning and design of a new trail connection, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds for the projects, the City shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”) a final work plan for each project, including the names of any subcontractors to be used in the completion of the project, and a project schedule and budget.
2. Prior to construction, the City shall submit evidence that it has obtained all necessary permits and approvals.

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3. The City shall acknowledge Conservancy and “Proposition 12” funding by erecting and maintaining a sign in connection with each project, the design and location of which has been approved by the Executive Officer.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 – 31409), with respect to public access. The proposed projects are consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
2. The proposed projects will serve more than local public needs. “

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize a grant of \$204,000 to the City of Laguna Beach (“City”) for parking improvements and trail planning in the City that will facilitate public access to the Orange County-managed Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park (“Park”). Of the total grant amount, the City would use \$79,000 for design and construction of a public parking lot to serve Park visitors and \$125,000 for planning and design of a new trail connection to the Park. The proposed projects are located in the coastal zone in the City (Exhibit 1).

Parking

The site of the proposed parking lot is a portion of the City-owned “DeWitt” property. The DeWitt property is served by Phillips Road, which to the north connects to Laguna Canyon Road, a busy east/west arterial highway linking inland communities to the coast in downtown Laguna Beach. To the south the road tapers off and becomes the Stair Step Trail, the only trail linking Laguna Canyon Road and the heavily used West Ridge Trail in the Park (Exhibit 1).

The presence of a privately-leased house on the property and a lack of signage and street parking (the entire area is a “Tow Away Zone”) result in low use of this trail connection to the Park. The City requests \$79,000 of Conservancy funds for parking improvements to encourage and support public access to the Park in this location. The City intends in the future to lease or transfer ownership of the house for a public use or uses compatible with wilderness park purposes and management. The current lease does not prevent the City from constructing and operating public parking on the property.

The proposed parking lot is situated between the privately-leased house and Laguna Canyon Creek, which courses along the south side of Laguna Canyon Road (Exhibit 2). The parking lot site is currently undeveloped but disturbed, inhabited by non-native grasses and shrubs. The proposed project involves planning and design, excavation and grading, and installation of a soft permeable surface to accommodate approximately 11 vehicles. The nearby dwelling unit is served by separate off-street parking.

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Following completion of the project, the City will install signage on Laguna Canyon Road alerting the public to the parking area and trail, and will work with the County and Laguna Canyon Foundation (“Foundation”) to make additional signage improvements and provide trail information. Completion of the project will coincide with planned improvements to the Stair Step Trail being implemented cooperatively by the Laguna Canyon Foundation and Orange County parks department (“OC Parks”).

Top of the World Trail

For years, the public could access the Park from the Top of the World neighborhood of Laguna Beach by walking or biking on a paved fire road.

In recent years, due to the construction of new homes, public access through the paved road was removed, forcing the public to use a rugged, informal wilderness trail that passes through private land. The current trail is steep and challenging for many public users and is in danger of being closed down at any time due to its location on private land. The City seeks to establish a new trail that will lead from a public street in this neighborhood into the Park.

Over the past year, the City has negotiated with several property owners to acquire an easement across their land for establishment of a new approximately 700 linear-foot trail with reduced grades and improved accessibility over steep terrain. Although the easement negotiations are not complete, the owners have thus far been willing to cooperate in the creation of an easement. If for some reason negotiations are not ultimately successful, the City controls a second easement nearby that could be improved with these funds. The City-owned easement would accomplish the linkage with the Park, but the connection would be less direct, less scenic, and potentially more expensive to construct.

The proposed authorization of \$125,000 would cover planning and design costs for the trail along one of the two easements (Exhibit 2). The trail will be referred to as the “Top of the World Trail.” Because the trail leads into the Park, a small section of the trail to be planned and designed by the City will be on land owned and managed by Orange County as part of the Park. The City would contribute an estimated \$185,000 needed to permit and construct the trail.

The City anticipates it will tap the Orange County Conservation Corps for assistance with construction activities.

City staff already have contributed more than 200 hours of in-kind services to the two projects in the form of entitlement processing, neighborhood meetings/contacts, construction bids/estimating, and City Council coordination/review. Going forward, it is anticipated City staff will dedicate an additional 300+ hours of in-kind services towards the successful completion of these projects.

Letters of support for both projects have been received from the Laguna Canyon Foundation, Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., and the County of Orange (Exhibit 3).

Site Description:

Parking area: The city-owned Dewitt Property is located in the coastal zone on a hillside overlooking the adjacent Laguna Coast Wilderness Park and is also contiguous to the Park. The

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property is served by Phillips Road, which becomes the Stair Step Trail leading into the Park. The road/trail connects an east-west coastal arterial highway, Laguna Canyon Road, to the West Ridge Trail, one of the most heavily used trails in the park. The proposed parking lot would be situated between a privately leased house located on the property and Laguna Canyon Creek, which runs parallel to Laguna Canyon Road on the highway's south side. The parking lot site is currently undeveloped but disturbed, inhabited by non-native grasses and shrubs.

Top of the World Trail: The trail would be located on a Rim Rock Canyon hillside adjacent to a residential neighborhood known as Top of the World, located approximately 2.5 miles from the coast. The project site also is adjacent to the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park and city-owned open space. A trail along the desired easement would offer outstanding views of the coastline, rock outcrops and coastal sage scrub habitat.

Project History: The Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 ("Proposition 12") allocates \$12,500,000 to the Coastal Conservancy to "acquire land needed to connect important coastal watershed and scenic areas in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park". (Public Resources Code § 5096.352(g).) A 2004 re-appropriation permitted the Conservancy to use these funds, subject to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, "to undertake projects for the South Coast Wilderness System of coastal canyons and watersheds in South Orange County, including, but not limited to, properties in Laguna Coast Wilderness Park and Aliso and Woods [*sic*] Canyons Wilderness Park".

Since the passage of Proposition 12, the non-profit Laguna Canyon Foundation (Foundation), the City of Laguna Beach (City), and the County of Orange (County) have been working together and with the Conservancy, the public, and other major conservation organizations to identify, prioritize and complete these projects. To date, the Conservancy has awarded grants totaling approximately \$11.6 million to the City, the Foundation, the County, and the City of Laguna Woods for Proposition 12 purposes. Projects to date have included acquisition of approximately 310 acres of open space for management as part of the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park; interpretive exhibits for the Nix Nature Center at the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park; a signage program at the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park; and land acquisition support grants to the Laguna Canyon Foundation.

In addition to the proposed authorization, staff is separately requesting an authorization to disburse \$675,000 to the County of Orange for public access improvements within the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park. The two proposed authorizations will use the remainder of Proposition 12 funds appropriated to the Conservancy for projects in the South Coast Wilderness.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$204,000
City of Laguna Beach	\$185,300

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Project Total

\$389,300

The expected source of Conservancy funds for the proposed project is a FY 2010/2011 re-appropriation to the Conservancy of funds appropriated in accordance with the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (Proposition 12, Public Resources Code § 5096.300 et. seq.). Pursuant to Public Resources Code § 5096.352, these funds are generally available for acquisition, preservation, restoration and enhancement of real property and the development of public use facilities in coastal areas and watersheds. Public Resources Code § 5096.352(g) specifically authorizes funds for acquisition of land needed to connect important coastal watershed and scenic areas in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. Pursuant to Public Resources Code § 5096.3075, in the FY 2004/2005 Budget Act, the legislature reallocated the remaining section 5096.352(g) funds for “projects for the South Coast Wilderness System of coastal canyons and watersheds in south Orange County, including, but not limited to, properties in Laguna Coast Wilderness Park and the Aliso and Woods [*sic*] Canyons Wilderness Park.” The proposed project will enhance public access to and within the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park, a coastal wilderness park, through construction of a new parking lot and design of a new trail, both of which will facilitate public access to the Park, and thus the proposed project is an appropriate use of Proposition 12 funds. The City will contribute an estimated \$185,300 of its own funds for entitlements, permits and construction of the Top of the World trail.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, specifically with Chapter 9 pertaining to public coastal access.

Under §31400.3, the Conservancy may provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal access ways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of Division 21. Consistent with this section, the proposed projects will help the City support and facilitate public access to a coastal wilderness park through parking improvements and trail planning.

Under § 31400.1, a grant to a local agency must serve more than local public needs. The proposed projects will serve more than local needs because they will facilitate public access to a coastal wilderness park that is of regional and statewide significance.

The proposed project is consistent with the City of Laguna Beach Local Coastal Program as described in the Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective 2D** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will fund planning and construction of new facilities to increase and enhance the public access and recreational opportunities of a coastal wilderness park.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on November 10, 2011, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Letters of support have been received from the Laguna Canyon Foundation, Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., and the County of Orange.
4. **Location:** The proposed projects are located within the coastal zone of the City of Laguna Beach.
5. **Need:** The desired projects will not occur without Conservancy participation.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The projects will support and facilitate access to a regional wilderness park, the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park, part of a 22,000-acre system of parks and preserves in central coastal Orange County known as the South Coast Wilderness. The preserved lands feature high priority habitat, endangered and threatened species of flora and fauna, significant geologic formations, watersheds, the only natural lakes in Orange County, wildlife corridors and hundreds of miles of trails leading to the coast. More than half a million visitors per year benefit from recreational and educational use of the region. The public access improvements will be excellent additions to the wilderness park system and the broad demographic of public who enjoy it daily.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project locations are not located in areas vulnerable to sea level rise. The parking area will be located approximately one mile from the shoreline. The future trail segment will be located approximately 2.5 miles from the coast and at a sufficiently high elevation to avoid the impacts of sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
16. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** Because these projects consist of public access improvements which are low-impact construction in nature, vulnerability to climate change will not be significant.
17. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The objective of the project is to provide low-

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intensity recreation to the public during daylight hours. While there are short- and long-term impacts associated with GHG emissions, they have been minimized to the greatest extent feasible. Short-term GHG emissions are associated with construction of the parking/staging area on the Dewitt property and the Top of the World Trail connection; however, these emissions are fairly minimal due to the relatively small construction scope. Construction-related emissions are primarily generated from mobile sources including trucks delivering construction materials, heavy equipment such as mini-excavator and tractor, and passenger vehicles. GHG emissions associated with construction would occur over a finite period and then cease. Because emissions that fall into this category are primarily from mobile sources, Best Management Practices (BMPs) are targeted at reducing the contributions from these sources. These include: 1) re-use of construction materials, including soil already onsite, thus eliminating truck trips; 2) shutting down diesel equipment rather than allowing to idle for long periods of time; 3) incorporation of sustainable materials to the greatest extent possible. Indirect GHG emissions are associated with off-site utility providers serving a project. For this project, no electricity would be required. In addition, it is important to note that these projects are intended to encourage non-vehicular transportation (bicycles, walking). By providing easier non-vehicular trail access for the public, the project is expected to reduce passenger-vehicle emissions.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The City's Local Coastal Program (LCP) consists of various elements of the City's General Plan and the City's Municipal Code. One of the primary components in the City's LCP is the City's Open Space/Conservation General Plan Element. The proposed projects are consistent with the following policies of the Open Space/Conservation General Plan Element:

Open Space/Conservation Element Policy 5B: Support the recreational use and development of surrounding open space lands, where environmentally feasible, to relieve demand for parklands within the City. Encourage preservation of Laguna Greenbelt in a natural state, with recreational access limited to passive activities such as nature trails and wildlife observation areas.

Open Space/Conservation Element Policy 6A: Pursue funding for the acquisition, development, operation and maintenance of the local trail system.

Open Space/Conservation Element Policy 6N: Pursue and provide for trail links within the City of Laguna Beach to connect trails, parks, and open space areas in adjacent jurisdictions.

Open Space/Conservation Element Policy 6S: Pursue the development of City trails that augment the existing County trail network.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed construction of the parking area on the DeWitt property is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under Section 15311 (Accessory Structures, Class 11) of the CEQA Guidelines, 14 Cal. Code of Regulations §§15000, et seq. The project is exempt because the small parking area of 9,000-square feet, accommodating approximately 11 vehicles, would be an accessory to an existing, adjacent trail, the Stair Step Trail, where there currently is no available parking. The parking area site was previously

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disturbed prior to annexation into the City and is inhabited only by non-native shrubs and grasses. Only minimal grading is anticipated for development of the lot with no import or export of earthen material. The lot will be built with a soft soil permeable surface and will incorporate water quality best management practices (BMPs) to improve surface water drainage.

The proposed trail planning and design, which consists of preparation of design, environmental and construction documents for a 700 linear-foot trail segment, is statutorily and categorically exempt from CEQA under two sections of the Guidelines. The project is statutorily exempt as provided in Section 15262 because it will involve only feasibility and planning analysis for possible future action that has not yet been adopted, approved or funded and it will include consideration of environmental factors. The project is categorically exempt pursuant to Section 15306 to the extent that it involves basic data collection and resource evaluation activities.

Staff will file a Notice of Determination and Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.